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Conservation encounters: transculturation in the 'contact zones' of empire

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In the last 20 years, Latin American countries have experienced a boom in conservation territories. At the same time, neoliberal restructuring of Latin American economies has devolved funding and management responsibilities to international NGOs. In this context, conservation projects have become important zones of encounter and contact, wherein those inhabiting protected areas are necessarily subject to and subjected by the discourses and practices of conservation institutions. How do local actors engage with these processes? This paper examines the cultural politics of conservation encounters in the Maya Biosphere Reserve, a protected area in Guatemala's northern department of Petén. Drawing upon the concept of transculturation and anti-essentialist framings of subject formation as performative, I outline how differently situated social groups in the reserve negotiate, contest and enact the daily discourses and practices of conservation as articulated by powerful US-based international organizations.

In 1990, a group of Guatemalan and United Statesian[1] environmentalists embarked on a truly ambitious project: to implement the Maya Biosphere Reserve, a newly created protected area in Guatemala's northern department of Petén. The Maya Biosphere Project, funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), in conjunction with the Guatemalan state, brought together United Statesians and Guatemalans for the purposes of pursuing particular environmental goals. Rather than asking whether or not these groups accomplished their stated goals, this paper explores how the *encounter* between individuals and collectives from differing social, institutional and geographical positions shapes the cultural politics of conservation.

Scholars throughout the Americas have long examined the ways in which the United States has shaped cultural practices within Latin American countries. In a recent rethinking of this issue, Gilbert Joseph proposes the notion of '*encounter*', a term borrowed from colonial studies, to frame the interactions wherein 'foreign people, ideas, commodities, and institutions have been received, contested, and appropriated' in Latin America.[2] For Joseph, the term 'encounter' is two-sided, in that its Latin root 'fuses *in* ("in") with *contra* ("against")'.[3] As such, the word connotes interactions fraught with contestation and conflict, but also connection, empathy and contract. In turn, Joseph's understanding of encounter is informed by Mary Louise Pratt's notion of

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'contact zones', which she defines as 'social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today'.[4]

Conservation projects have become important zones of encounter and contact in Latin America. In the last 20 years, Latin American countries have experienced a boom in conservation, as evidenced by the increased number of protected areas as well as the emergence of national environmental state and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).[5] The expanding reach of international conservation institutions drives this boom, ranging from the United Nations' Man and the Biosphere Programme to US-based environmental NGOs like Conservation International and the Nature Conservancy. Many newly created protected areas are directly or indirectly funded and/or managed by such NGOs.[6] This devolution of responsibility is tied to neoliberal restructuring of Latin American economies, which has meant a reduction in funding for social and environmental initiatives. As a consequence, US-based international NGOs have had a disproportionate say over the direction of conservation priorities and agendas throughout Latin American countries.[7] Bolstered by their claims to technical expertise, impartiality and goodwill, NGOs naturalize their vision of human–land relations as correct, thereby producing *truths* that are then embedded in conservation policies.[8] Social groups inhabiting protected areas are necessarily subject to and subjected by the discourses and practices of conservation institutions. The questions then arise: how do local actors, with their own sets of locally embedded discourses and practices, engage with these processes? In what ways are local social and environmental formations reconfigured through conservation encounters?

To get at how these questions are played out on the ground, I draw upon the concept of *transculturation,* first developed by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz to study processes of cultural change under conditions shaped by the legacies of colonialism.[9] Silvia Spitta defines transculturation as 'the complex processes of adjustment and re-creation – cultural, literary, linguistic, and personal – that allow for new, vital, and viable configurations to arise out of the clash of cultures and violence of colonial and neo-colonial appropriations'.[10] In a more selective interpretation, Mary Louise Pratt uses the concept to refer to the ways in which 'subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture'.[11] For the most part, scholars have examined transculturation in the context of artistic creations, such as art, literature, theatre and crafts.[12] Given that visions of nature and human–land relations are such rich sites of cultural production, I find the concept ideally suited to exploring the processes of exchange and reinvention that occur in the context of conservation encounters.

Using notions of encounter and contact to frame conservation projects, this paper examines processes of transculturation during the first seven years of the USAID's Maya Biosphere Project in Guatemala when the USAID was the most important source of funding and US-based NGOs were directly responsible for implementing conservation and sustainable development projects in the reserve. In particular, I examine how differently situated social groups in the reserve elaborate, appropriate and contest the

daily discourses and practices of conservation as articulated by powerful US-based international organizations. My analysis draws from my ethnographic research in the reserve between 1993 and 2003; I used participant observation, semi-structured and structured interviews to study the intimate and everyday relations between locals and US-based NGOs. My relationships with individuals and collectives in the reserve were defined in various ways. At certain periods, I collaborated with groups to accomplish particular goals in exchange for time that individuals dedicated to interviews. At other times, my presence was defined by my academic goals. While I have discussed my ideas with NGO staff and community leaders on numerous occasions, I alone am responsible for the analysis presented here. Unless otherwise noted, I have changed the names of individuals.

Before turning to a detailed discussion of my theoretical and methodological approach, two caveats are in order. First, in using transculturation as a framework for understanding conservation encounters, I risk fostering the illusion that the social groups brought together are 'pristine, autonomous cultures moving directly into contact, like billiard balls striking each other on a felt-covered table – and therefore easily identifiable as "internal" and "external".[13] In Guatemala – as elsewhere in Latin America – overlapping histories of Spanish colonialism, internal colonialism and US imperialism make such dichotomous framings impossible. Rather, subjectivities, social and environmental formations and institutions are best seen as already transculturated constructs.[14]

Secondly, my analysis of transculturation in this paper is geographically delimited by my ethnographic focus on the implications of conservation in the daily lives of social groups living within the Maya Biosphere Reserve. Consequently, I am not able to speak to the ways in which the subject identities, discourses and practices of US-based NGOs are reconfigured through experiences at local-level sites in Guatemala. However, this is a critical and necessary approach for two reasons. First, such research would disrupt unidirectional understandings of US–Latin American relations and secondly, it would allow for studies of how encounters shape dominant cultures within the US. Two recent collections – *Close encounters of empire* and *Cultures of United States Imperialism* – call for research along these lines.[15]

Situating conservation encounters theoretically and methodologically

Employing concepts like encounter, contact, and transculturation to analyse conservation in Latin America represents a departure from prevailing approaches. In general, conservation projects are viewed as necessary steps to prevent environmental degradation, and scholars tend to ask if and under what conditions environmental policies achieve their stated goals.[16] Or, environmental regulation is analysed as a site of struggle over contested resources, and scholars seek to determine the impacts for differently situated social groups.[17] While crucial to advancing knowledge of environmental change, such approaches tend to assign individuals and collectives

coherent identities prior to their entry into social and environmental relations.[18] Hence, social groups and their ecological practices come to appear self-evident, with pre-given, timeless characteristics.

Recent anthropological research, as in Donald Moore's study of the micro-politics of conservation in Zimbabwe's Eastern Highlands, problematizes such essentializing moves, demonstrating that subject formation is at stake in conservation, along with the very configuration of nature.[19] Yet, as Tania Murray Li argues in her analysis of indigeneity in Indonesia, to examine the formation of social groups is not to suggest that identities are the product of wilful invention: 'self-identification is not natural or inevitable, nor simply invented, adopted or imposed.'[20] Rather, Li concludes, identity is a contingent outcome of political and cultural articulations at specific historical junctures.

Building upon these fine-grained and embodied analyses, my goal is to enrich political ecological approaches with tools for un-mapping how subject positions and categories of human–land relations *come into being* in and through the action of conservation encounters. To this end, my theoretical framework brings transculturation into conversation with anti-essentialist framings of subject formation as performative. The concept of transculturation places importance on the historical specificity of conservation encounters. Who is coming together? Under what conditions? What are the specific configurations of power and knowledge, and how do they privilege and attempt to fix particular social and environmental formations, thereby rendering others unlivable or invisible? To understand better how discourses and practices are embodied and enacted, I draw upon Judith Butler's framing of the subject as an effect of power relations.[21] From this perspective, there is no essence or foundation to which subjects will tend or revert. Rather, for Butler, subject formation comes about through the repetitive performance of normative or compelled discourses and practices.[22] If performativity frames the subject as constituted through discursive and material practices, transculturation helps us to see that this process takes place within historically specific social, cultural and politico-economic junctures.

Importantly, performativity provides tools for understanding how individual subjects negotiate the discourses and disciplining practices of powerful groups and institutions. Although social actors have not created these conditions, and are not able to step outside them, Butler suggests that actors do have the 'possibility of reworking the very conventions by which we are enabled'.[23] Geraldine Pratt explains this possibility in terms of the multiple and often contradictory discourses through which individuals are produced: 'bringing one discourse into relation with another can open points for resistance.'[24] Adding geographical specificity to this argument, she emphasizes that discourses are produced in particular sites – they are situated practices.[25] Consequently, individuals may become aware of contradictions between discursive formations through the daily practices of living within and moving through specific sites.[26] This is an important consideration in the context of conservation encounters, for the individuals and collectives that are brought together hail from different geographical contexts and – given that individuals are constituted as socially different by interlocking axes of power along the lines of nationality, class, race, and

gender – they move through differing social contexts at international, national and regional scales.

To examine processes of transculturation in the Maya Biosphere Reserve, I focus in on the everyday discourses and practices of conservation encounters, with attention to how they are elaborated, performed, negotiated and contested in specific contexts. After an introduction to the research context, the next section of the paper focuses on how the power of US-based NGOs is operationalized through the production of knowledge, in the form of project proposals, technical studies and research reports that gather on office shelves, their pages yellowing. In the third section, I complement my textual analysis with ethnographic research. Here, I present three moments of transculturation detailing how members of the BioItzá, an indigenous environmental group located in the reserve, engage with, enact and reconfigure conservationist discourses and practices.

My goal is to depict transculturation *in action,* to highlight the iterative, momentary and contradictory processes of subject formation – for such processes do not have a beginning or end, but are part of ongoing social interaction and change. How to convey a sense of this dynamism is a challenge, for academic conventions tend to rely upon and indeed privilege individual interviews or testimonials as the basis for producing legitimate knowledge. My representational strategy is to portray a wide array of 'research performances', or the narratives, actions, conflicts and reactions enacted in the daily performances of embodied experience.[27]

Research context: conservation encounters in Guatemala's zones of deforestation

In the last 15 years, US-based Conservation International and The Nature Conservancy have expanded their programs in Latin America.[28] In Guatemala, this trend has meant that US institutions financed studies of biodiversity and lax environmental regulations and promoted specific conservation agendas and protected-area models. One important outcome of US interest in Guatemalan environmental issues was increased attention to the dramatic rates of deforestation in the northern department of Petén (see Figure 1).[29] Constituting one-third of national territory, the Petén holds an important place in this small country's imaginative geography. The grandeur of its jaguars and the magnificence of its Mayan temples rising above the forest canopy have long inspired patriotism and awe.[30] Moreover, the Petén's forests have been imagined as a storehouse of natural riches, a source of future wealth.[31] However, new research in the late 1980s showed that between the 1960s and the 1980s, about 50 per cent of the Petén's forests had been felled.

This dramatic pace of deforestation has its roots in Guatemala's history of land inequality, modernization strategies and civil war. In the 1960s, the Guatemalan government hoped to draw the Petén into the national economy by expanding capital-intensive resource extraction projects; the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Fund provided finance capital for commercial logging and cattle

FIGURE 1 Map of Guatemala. (Cartographer: Paul Jance.)

ranching.[32] At the same time, the Guatemalan government attempted to encourage planned migration to the Petén as an answer to the increasing political unrest associated with landlessness and lack of economic alternatives to agribusiness.[33] These policies allowed for the privatization of public land south of parallel 17'10° and the creation of a land market in the Petén.[34] In this context, the Petén's population grew from approximately 25 000 in 1960 to 500 000 in the late 1990s as *ladinos*[35] and Chortí from the *Oriente* region and Q'eqchí from Alta and Baja Verapaz moved to the Petén hoping to build better lives.[36] Some were escaping the violence of Guatemala's civil war, which wreaked havoc throughout the country for over 30 years. During this era, *Peteneros* (people of the Petén) experienced a loss of control over the region's future, a sentiment voiced in *Revista Petén-Itzá,* a magazine produced by and for local elites.[37] For instance, many Peteneros lost access to land and natural resources as previously usufruct rights to land came to depend upon ability to pay.[38] Moreover, politico-economic and demographic changes led urban-based Peteneros to shift from resource-based economic strategies to employment in education, local government, administration and tourism.

Awareness of rapid environmental change in such a treasured region prompted Guatemalan and United Statesian individuals and institutions to action. They sought political support for increased environmental protections from the first civilian president elected in 25 years, Vinicio Cerezo. In 1989, President Cerezo signed legislation creating a new system of protected areas and an administrative agency responsible for its management: *Consejo Nacional de Areas Protegídas* (CONAP – National Council of Protected Areas). The Maya Biosphere Reserve was one part of this system of protected areas, and encircles previously existing national parks including Tikal National Park, created in 1949 to protect the ancient Maya city-state of Tikal.

United Statesians played leading roles in the creation and implementation of the Maya Biosphere Reserve between the late 1980s and late 1990s.[39] In the words of a Guatemalan conservation project director, individuals and institutions from the US had a 'strong influence on the design of the preliminary studies and on the planning and structuring of the proposal for the [Maya Biosphere] reserve'. Funding flows from the period are indicative of this influence. Anthropologist James Nations produced an analysis of conservation in Guatemala while a Fulbright Scholar in 1988.[40] With funding from the USAID and The Nature Conservancy, Nations, along with some of Guatemala's most prominent biologists and environmentalists, produced a preliminary technical study of the northern Petén in 1989.[41] Nation's study became the basis for the USAID's Maya Biosphere Project Paper.[42]

In addition, United Statesians were influential in choosing the biosphere reserve model as the most appropriate conservation model for the northern Petén. In the words of two researchers working for Conservation International: 'A biosphere reserve is a natural solution to the varied economic and preservation challenges of the northern Petén.'[43] The biosphere reserve model is an attempt to make sustainable development compatible with nature protection.[44] To this end, biosphere reserves are divided into nuclear zones with a high degree of protection; multiple-use zones that permit 'traditional' use; and buffer zones, wherein sustainable development projects are implemented to improve environmental management (see Figure 2).

Due to limits on funding for social and environmental issues, the Guatemalan government signed an agreement with USAID to initiate the Maya Biosphere Project in 1990. The Project's goal was to 'improve the long-term economic well-being of Guatemala's population through the rational management of the natural resources'.[45] To accomplish this goal, USAID contracted three US-based international NGOs to carry out conservation projects: The Nature Conservancy (TNC) to strengthen the reserve's management; Conservation International (CI) to encourage economic alternatives; and CARE International to carry out environmental education.

The creation of the Maya Biosphere Reserve led to structural changes in the legal and institutional frameworks governing human–land relations and natural resource use in the reserve, thereby reconfiguring power relations at multiple geographical scales. For instance, the new laws directly affect and seek to reorganize local inhabitants' relationship to nature, with uneven effects upon those reserve residents whose subsistence depends upon access to natural resources. At a regional scale, the institutional changes created a power vacuum, wherein new actors, especially USAID

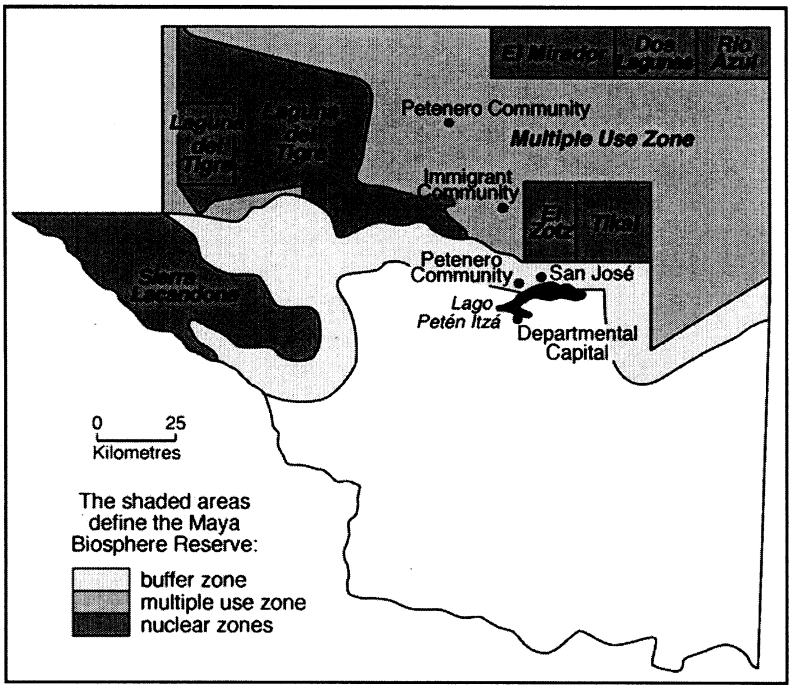

FIGURE 2 The Maya Biosphere Reserve. (Cartographer: Paul Jance.)

and US NGOs, achieved unprecedented power in directing the implementation and management of the reserve.[46] In part, their power stemmed from CONAP's limited financial and political support, particularly in the first seven or eight years of the project; as Ismael Ponciano points out, public investment in all of the Petén represented only 0.6 per cent of the total national budget in 1995.[47] Finally, a US government institution achieved the power of exerting a significant influence on national-level affairs; while this is not a new trend in the history of US–Guatemala relations, conservation represents a new arena in which it is taking place.

As I detail elsewhere, the creation of the reserve did not include consultations with local residents and authorities.[48] People had no say in the laws that reshaped their lives; instead, many learned that they lived in a reserve after the fact, sometimes up to a year or two later. Moreover, authoritarian measures were used to implement the reserve. Whether or not they agree with these changes, people living in or around the reserve are subject to and subjected by the discourses and practices of conservation projects.

Project encounters: constituting the subjects of conservation

After the creation of the reserve, the US NGOs began putting together their staff, compiling data on vegetation, soils, environmental degradation and human–land

relations, and establishing project goals. United Statesians served as project directors, staff and consultants. Although few Guatemalans served as consultants, several individuals from the Petén were hired as staff and came to have an important influence over project design within certain NGOs. One Petenero in particular achieved considerable influence, especially within Conservation International: Carlos Soza, whose family has a long history of forest collecting. Soza's charisma, deep interest in and knowledge of the Petén, and master's thesis study on the reserve all contributed to his appointment as director of CI's local NGO, ProPetén.[49] Sadly, he died of cancer in June 2003; Guatemala's environmental movement lost one of its important leaders.

Through these research encounters, NGOs produced knowledge that served as the foundation for projects designed to accomplish specific conservation goals. In this section, I examine conservationist discourses about human–land relations in the northern Petén, the site of the Maya Biosphere Reserve. As I illustrate, the discourses fixate on *Peteneros* and *sureños* (of south-eastern Guatemala) as the primary actors relevant to forest conservation strategies, while omitting or excluding other actors with stakes in the reserve, including cattle ranchers, logging companies, oil interests and conservationists themselves. Using geographical referents as the primary markers of identity, this framing draws upon a local/outsider binary to constitute and fix collectives, while delineating rights to the reserve's natural resources.

Elaborating local/outsider subjectivities

Conservationist discourses define Peteneros as members of communities historically dependent upon forest collecting; this category includes *ladino* urban-based families whose positions of power are rooted in the colonial era, as well as *ladino* inhabitants of forest collecting settlements. Prior to the reserve's creation, a study directed by anthropologist James Nations estimated that 6 000 people in the northern Petén were involved in collecting 'renewable natural resources from the tropical forest', including *chicle* (gum or latex from Manilkara zapote), *xate* (decorative palm fronds, Chamaedorea elegans and C. oblongata), and allspice (Pimienta dioica), worth US$6 million per year.[50] Chicle had been the keystone of northern Petén's economy since the mid-19th century, while the other two non-timber forest products achieved importance only in the mid-20th century.[51] In subsequent proposals and management plans, conservation organizations framed the extraction of natural resources from 'natural ecosystems' as key to the success of the reserve.[52] Forest collecting, said to be a 'traditional' form of resource management, is characterized as being inherently conservationist. For instance, Nations' study suggests that harvesting non-timber forest products 'promote[s] conservation and sustained use of the Petén tropical forest. Knowing that their economic future lies in the sustained use of xate, chicle, and allspice, families who harvest these resources are strong promoters of forest protection.'[53]

Peteneros are defined in relation to sureños, or immigrants from departments south of the Petén who have arrived since the era of colonization in the 1960s. Studies in the

early 1990s showed that most migrants lived in rural areas and relied upon agricultural production, although the majority combined subsistence strategies to support their families; about one-third lived in urban areas and worked in the service sector. At that time, the immigrant population included those with 15–30 years in the Petén, as well as more recent migrants. While some individuals had purchased plots of land, most living in what became the Maya Biosphere Reserve had purchased rights to farmland from another individual who had done some initial clearing.[54] These individuals had no secure rights to land; the most vulnerable were those living in areas that fell under the designation of nuclear zones, which do not permit human settlement.

In his master's thesis published in 1996, Carlos Soza establishes clear boundaries between Peteneros and immigrants in the reserve.[55] Enshrined as objective knowledge, Soza's study came to have a significant influence upon conservationist discursive representations and project designs, especially within Conservation International. Soza clearly stipulates which communities may be classified as *traditionally* Petenero: Flores, Santa Ana, San José, San Andrés, Carmelita, Uaxactún, La Libertad, San Francisco.[56] His categorizations are based upon geographical location and age of settlement, but also on particular ways of interacting with nature. Soza correlates length of time in the Petén with the adoption of appropriate environmental practices, suggesting that natural morals become apparent over time; thus Peteneros are said to maintain 'harmonious relations: man–nature'.[57] Traditional Peteneros – whether forest collectors, farmers, or teachers – are said to have developed a 'value system of ecological reciprocity: what one takes from the forest, one must return in some fashion.'[58] As an example of such relations, Peteneros in the communities of Carmelita and Uaxactún are said to have 'practiced agriculture only as a means of subsistence; and as such, for economic reasons, they are aware of the need for environmental conservation.'[59]

In contrast to Petenenos, Soza suggests that '*sureños* only care about intensive agriculture and if possible, ranching, and the forest doesn't matter to them'.[60] He wonders why 'these people have destructive attitudes instead of taking advantage of the forest and its benefits to themselves and others'.[61] Indeed, they are said to be unable to recognize the value of precious hardwoods, which they simply burn for maize.[62] In a recent article, CI staff members suggest: 'new immigrants cut down large tracts of forest for extensive monocultivation of corn and cattle ranching because they are unfamiliar with the traditional livelihood strategies of the old forest society'.[63] In the end, migrant farmers are held responsible for deforestation in the reserve, to the exclusion of other actors.[64]

Even as conservationist discourses profess to describe human–land relations in the reserve, the Petenero/sureño dichotomy is best understood as the product of articulation between conservationist imaginaries and specific local historically sedimented narratives and practices. Conservationists were receptive to Petenero patterns of self-identification in relation to immigrants, whom they described as environmentally destructive and violent. That Petenero rather than immigrant voices were heard is due to their perceived land use practices, but also to the socioeconomic and demographic changes that allowed some Peteneros to achieve the educational background and skill

sets necessary for employment with NGOs. In turn, NGOs sought out many of these individuals because of their presumption that Peteneros naturally had a stake in conservation agendas. Through these processes of encounter and transculturation, the category of 'Petenero' solidified to mean environmental caretakers with special knowledge and legitimate forest dwellers. Peteneros came to mobilize such narratives in the everyday discourses of conservation, in ways that stressed why Peteneros should be given positions of power within the reserve's decision-making circles.

In sum, conservation encounters in the early 1990s occurred in the context of specific historical, political and economic junctures, which created opportunities for alliances between conservationists and Peteneros. Conservationist imaginaries of ideal human–land relations in tropical forests articulate with those of influential Peteneros to produce and fix subject positions deemed appropriate to achieving forest conservation strategies planned for the reserve. Importantly, these discursive articulations have material consequences in that the knowledge produced/legitimated by NGOs delineates those social groups whose human–land relations make them legitimate participants in the creation of policies. They also define which management practices will be restricted or subjected to increased regulation. The future of those whose practices are deemed inappropriate – migrant farmers – is rendered uncertain.

And yet, in relying upon geography as the primary marker of identity and human–land relations, conservationists' discourses created space for contradiction and contestation. Consider, for instance, the complaint expressed by foreign anthropologists in 1993 that 'the sole remaining Maya native to the forest' were not consulted by government organizations and NGOs working in the Maya Biosphere Reserve.[65] The scholars are referring to the Itza', native residents of the Petén whose livelihoods also depended historically upon the forest. That the Itza' had been left out reveals how the category Petenero, as it came to be deployed by conservationists, produced homogeneous collectives, masking patterns of internal differentiation constituted along other axes of power and identification. Indeed, the category does not include those native residents of the Petén who are classified as *indigenous*. In the following section, I explore how those erased by the category of Petenero engage with conservationist discourses in the context of shifting power relations, environmental values and resource governance regimes.

Ethnographies of transculturation in conservation encounters

Prior to the arrival of conservation organizations, the northern Petén's residents were classified as Peteneros and *Mayeros*; the latter term was used to refer to the inhabitants of an Itza'-speaking community in San José.[66] Located on the shores of Lake Petén-Itzá, the village was formed during the Spanish colonial era's policy of congregating indigenous peoples. Rather than using geography as the primary referent, the term 'Mayero' highlights the Maya or pre-Hispanic origins of the community, and therefore privileges racial and cultural heritage as sources of identification. This classification

system reflects and reproduces Guatemala's social order, organized through biological and cultural hierarchies, which positions as inferior members of 22 different indigenous linguistic groups.[67] Until the late 20th century, legal restrictions as well as racial imaginaries and social practices served to exclude indigenous people from taking on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.[68]

Historically, people from San José – Sanjoseños – depended upon subsistence farming; men had the opportunity to earn additional income through forest collecting, while many women grew vegetables and herbs and collected medicinal plants to sell in the urban area. Mayeros had political control over the municipality of San José and residents had access to land through the *ejido* (communal lands); they also relied upon the forest for additional livelihood needs.[69] In the ladino-dominated Petén, Mayeros have been marginalized at the local level through exclusionary practices, many of which stemmed from or articulated with national-level policies to assimilate indigenous peoples into the ladino body politic. Thus, in interviews, older residents remember having been beaten for speaking Itza' or wearing clothing that identified them as indigenous; individuals both young and old describe subtle and overt forms of discrimination and racism.

In short, while Mayeros are *of the Petén*, and on this basis should be included within the geographical category of Peteneros deployed by conservationists, racial imaginaries and discriminatory practices have meant that Mayeros were excluded from conservation in a number of ways. For instance, differences in socioeconomic resources and opportunities over the long term have meant that few Sanjoseños had the requisite education and skills to be employed by NGOs or state institutions like CONAP. Moreover, due to exclusionary citizenship formations, Mayero participation in ladino-dominated civil society has been limited. In addition, my interviews suggest that community leaders' initial experiences with NGOs convinced them that conservation projects would be dictated by the NGO, not the community. Consequently, many leaders developed ambivalent relationships with NGOs, which constrained their ability to participate fully in decision-making circles.

At the same time, the reserve's creation sparked broader interest in San José, which had been discursively framed in academic literature as an indigenous community with unique environmental knowledge. In part, this framing stems from the presumption that Sanjoseños represent a direct link to pre-Hispanic Maya societies. As anthropologist Scott Atran points out, the notion of continuity between contemporary Itza' communities and the Classic Lowland Maya has a long history in archaeological research on agricultural systems; his own work seeks to solidify these claims through linguistic and cultural analysis of agro-forestry practices in San José.[70] In this research context, San José became a site of contact: as community leaders formed alliances with foreign researchers and conservationists to address the implications of changing environmental governance regimes, they encountered new discursive formations that privileged indigenous peoples as environmental managers.

To understand the cultural politics of conservation encounters in San José, this section draws upon my ethnographic research as well as written texts such as funding proposals and brochures. Here, I outline three instances of transculturation,

wherein community members elaborate and negotiate the discourses of conservation, while delineating newly reconfigured subject positions. In the first ethnographic moment, I trace discursive shifts in male community leaders' representations of indigenous peoples and political agency. The second ethnographic moment outlines the emergence of a new collective, the *pueblo Itza'*. The third highlights the ways in which women in San José are drawn into the pueblo Itza'. Here, my goal is to point to unpredictable but not random moments of articulation and delineation.

Anthropological timelessness and political agency in San José

San José historically has attracted foreign researchers, most famously Ruben Reina and Norman Schwartz.[71] In the early 1990s a new group of foreign scholars were active in San José, conducting linguistic and anthropological research on the Itza' language, environmental knowledge and cultural practices. These research encounters created new spaces for the valuation of indigenous language, culture and practices; that foreigners were eager to know and understand the intricacies of life in San José made Guatemala's nation-building policies of assimilation appear questionable and contradictory. In 1991, male leaders created the Project to Rescue the Maya Itzá Language; their goal was to promote bilingual education. Elders were paid to teach courses in Itza' reading and writing to young and older people. This project symbolized a cultural and linguistic revitalization movement in the community. By the early 1990s, Mayeros increasingly referred to themselves as Itza'. In this first moment of transculturation, I focus on community leaders' interactions with scholars and scholarly representations of their identity and human–land relations.

As noted, scholars expressed surprise that the Itza' had been excluded from the inner decision-making circles of the Maya Biosphere Reserve. In 1991, they began collaborating with leaders in San José to create the Association for the Conservation of the BioItzá and the Biósfera Itzá Reserve, a 3600-hectare forest reserve located in the municipal ejido.[72] In community meetings leading up to the formal creation of the BioItzá, sceptics reportedly worried that foreigners were involved only to obtain control over municipal lands.[73] BioItzá leaders explained to Sanjoseños that the forest reserve would enable the community to conserve the culture and language their ancestors had left to them. The BioItzá also planned to take advantage of the funding available from US-based NGOs to promote eco-tourism.[74] They hoped the association and its forest reserve would provide the means to build an economy of cultural identity in which livelihood is gained through marketing and selling indigenous cultural practices and products.[75]

In a 1991 funding proposal to support the Biósfera Itzá reserve, scholars emphasized the community's traditional forest culture:

> The destruction of the Maya rainforest – through logging, ranching and the immigration of poor slash-and-burn agriculturists – has reduced the original indigenous population to a handful. In the Petén, there are

> less than 100 families of Itza-speaking Maya left. Because the Itza are denied access to much of the remaining forest that they traditionally managed, they and their forest may be doomed.[76]

In his research on indigenous environmental knowledge in San José, anthropologist Scott Atran characterizes Itza' human–land relations as 'a symbiosis that cyclically works to sustain Itza culture by regenerating the forest's biodiversity indefinitely'.[77] This relationship, however, is said to be vanishing, as 'the enduring basis for Petén Maya forest culture, which has survived for centuries, perhaps millennia, is now threatened with imminent extinction as the trees are razed, the animals disappear, and the Itza language dies'.[78]

These initial statements about the BioItzá appropriate the discourse of wildlife conservation by referring to the Itza' as an endangered species and by using the term 'habitat' to mean place of residence, thereby collapsing human and animal groups. In addition, the narratives represent the Itza' as passive actors threatened by socio-economic change, thereby creating a space for outsiders who can help. Indeed, the funding proposal suggests that the Itza' are 'too few to protect themselves'.[79] Such discourses construct a vision of the Itza' as a forest-dwelling people whose language and culture preserve harmonious human–land relations.

While working with this group of anthropologists/activists, the BioItzá leaders initially appropriated their essentializing discourses and represented themselves as indigenous forest dwellers with special relations to nature. For instance, the BioItzá's first promotional brochure states that the local reserve 'serves as habitat for the last Maya Itza, with an extension of 3,600 hectares of forest, in which live an infinity of fauna in danger of extinction'.[80]

In the years that followed, the BioItzá worked with numerous NGOs and consultants; Itza' leaders formed ambivalent attitudes towards NGO staff and found that many tried to dictate community projects. Also, the BioItzá leadership came into conflict with one foreign scholar after realizing that he was exploiting his relationship with them for his own personal benefit; he was ordered out of the community.[81]

By 1996, the BioItzá's narratives no longer represented the group as weak and in need of outside help; they had stepped out of anthropological timelessness and into contemporary time and space. In fact, BioItzá leaders sought to highlight the autogenesis of their discourses and practices to distance themselves from the group of scholars active in San José. For instance, in mid-1996, when I asked how the BioItzá came to be, Don Benito, the association's leader, minimized the role of scholars/outsiders:

> The idea of the conservation of the BioItzá came directly from the community; who directed it was Don Benito because he had the idea of doing so. But we did not have the resources to buy supplies to go into the forest for 15–20 days [to demarcate the area]. There was the desire but not the facility to do anything.

He indicated that two foreign researchers were involved, but only in offering to find money and equipment to support the BioItzá's efforts. He concluded: 'in San José, our own efforts [*esfuerzos*] have gotten us where we are. It is common for locals to internalize the ideas and ways of others. We can learn what they have to offer but we have to keep it our own [*propio*].'[82] His statements seek to establish the Itza' as

agents of their own destiny, and to position them as equal partners in relation to outsiders.

This shift in emphasis is manifest in a letter written by the BioItzá to solicit support from international environmental organizations in 1996:

> As the last indigenous inhabitants of the Petén's forest, the Maya Itzá have fought to maintain the forest, culture and language of their great civilization ... We are the first indigenous organization to worry about our natural environment in the northern forested region of the Petén, which has suffered deforestation and destruction due to the increasing number of immigrants from other parts of the country.[83]

Here, the BioItzá represent themselves as empowered agents fighting to protect the environment, and as 'the first indigenous organization' in Guatemala to be involved in conservation. In a letter to the Petén's governor requesting support, the BioItzá members reinforced their claims by representing themselves as the only Maya organization in Guatemala actively involved in the management of a nature reserve.[84]

Such shifts in identification are indicative of processes of transculturation in the contact zones of conservation. In the early years, the BioItzá members appropriate the narratives of powerful groups – in this case, foreign anthropologists – representing them as timeless natives living in harmony with nature. They also adopt and reconfigure the protected-area model of conservation promoted by international NGOs. Over time, however, the discourses and practices of helping came to appear paradoxical, in that they significantly empowered the helper. Out of this space of contradictions, BioItzá leaders began to represent themselves in ways that stress autogenesis and political agency. At the same time, the BioItzá's narratives retain scholarly discourses of the Itza' as a group with special knowledge of, and therefore claims to, the forest. Indeed, this discourse came to form the basis of an emerging collective identity.

From Mayeros to the Pueblo Itza'

The BioItzá's discursive shifts did not transpire in a vacuum; rather, discourses stressing political agency crystallized during the negotiations between the Guatemalan government and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (the guerrilla movement's umbrella organization) to end Guatemala's 30-plus-year civil war. Since 1994, when the United Nations Mission for the Verification of Human Rights (MINUGUA) arrived in Guatemala to monitor the peace negotiations, their representatives, trained specifically in indigenous rights, travelled throughout the country, including the Petén, providing legal aid to those seeking to denounce human rights abuses.[85] In 1995, the Guatemalan government and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity signed 'The Agreement on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples', which recommends changes to the legal system to recognize, among other things, indigenous communal land management and customary law.[86] After the Peace Accords were signed in 1996, the Rigoberta Menchú Foundation and other groups funded community workshops to explain the Peace Accords, and encouraged people to participate in drafting proposals for change.

One of these workshops was held in San José in early 1997. This period also marks a watershed in Guatemala's Pan-Mayan movement, a term used to describe the numerous, disparate organizations fighting for social and legal changes to give all indigenous peoples the rights to participate more fully in politics, while maintaining some degree of cultural autonomy.[87]

As Itza' leaders moved between San José and other parts of Guatemala to participate in a variety of Pan-Mayan organizations and attend legal workshops, they encountered the discourses of indigenous rights, which offer an alternative that departs significantly from official discourses of assimilation. Drawing from participant observation and interviews, my second ethnographic moment outlines the reconfiguration of indigenous subjectivities as Itza' leaders brought together the discourses of environmentalism and indigenous rights.

Don Benito, the BioItzá's charismatic leader, recounted one of his first trips to a Pan-Mayan meeting of community elders; this is what he recalls about his turn to stand up and speak:

> I said, 'History tells us that we are Maya, and that there are many Maya, but we don't know each other. We are separated [geographically] and yet we are from the same flesh.' And the people responded by saying, 'The Itza' is right.'

Don Benito's narrative points to one of the most important implications of the Pan-Mayan movement is the creation of the Maya as a collective or *pueblo*. As Kay Warren notes, the term *pueblo* is used within the Pan-Mayan movement to indicate 'people, nation, community', and an 'imagined community' involved in a struggle to overcome Guatemala's system of internal colonialism, which historically has excluded indigenous people from participation and representation in the political system.[88] Hence, the term *pueblo* alludes to strength in numbers. As one leader in San José informed me,

> The old people have that fear from the past but the indigenous folk today, we are no longer in the minority, and people are afraid of us, afraid that there will be an indigenous president. Indigenous identity is being recuperated, the community has awakened, and times are passed in which we will be taken advantage of. The ladinos are the ones that are now going to suffer... the indigenous people are finding ways to obtain power.

After the signing of the Peace Accords, the term *pueblo* began to appear in the discourses of BioItzá members. In a public meeting to mobilize support for the BioItzá in early February 1997, a man stood up and said: 'People [in San José] are saying that they are not indigenous. They see the census, it lists "ladino/indigenous" and they choose "ladino". But it is *us* – when you hear talk on the radio about *el pueblo indígena* [the indigenous community], that refers to *us*.' In this way, BioItzá leaders introduced the community at large to the notion that they formed part of a Pan-Maya community.

The motive for the February meeting was a dispute between the BioItzá and the principal municipal authority or *alcalde*, who had threatened to take over the group's leadership and replace it with his own supporters. The BioItzá leaders suspected that the alcalde intended to allow logging within the reserve and grant the municipality's

immigrant constituents rights to farm the land. In this context, the *pueblo indígena* was not framed as an all-inclusive term; rather, it was used to police boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour within the Itza' community. In particular, boundaries were constructed in reference to human–land relations deemed appropriate to an indigenous people. Thus, at the above-noted meeting, which witnessed the emergence of the pueblo indígena in San José, one man argued that *they* (the BioItzá supporters) understood conservation, whereas the alcalde and his supporters (including a number of non-Itza') did not. In essence, this man claimed that the BioItzá supporters had rights – as authentic Itza' – to control the local forest reserve.

Appropriate Itza' identity crystallized in a local press conference, which the BioItzá organized in mid-February 1997, in hopes of drawing national media attention to their plight. In honour of the event, the BioItzá leadership donned clothing that I had never seen them wear: simple white cotton shirts, some of which were adorned with cross-stitch patterns characteristic to San José, but abandoned when indigenous dress was outlawed. In carefully chosen words, the BioItzá leaders articulated their cause in terms of abuses against an indigenous group seeking to protect nature.

The following excerpt indicates the tone of their statement:

> We lament that the alcalde, although he has the physiognomy of an indigenous Maya Itzá, his thinking, his actions, his proceedings, his mind are so colonized that he suffers from a grave problem. And while the [Spanish] invader Urzúa y Arismendi and his soldiers failed to accomplish the annihilation process, he – although indigenous – will finish by eliminating his own brothers.[89]

In this statement, BioItzá leaders frame the alcalde's abuse of power in terms of continuing patterns of internal colonialism in Guatemala. Thus, the alcalde's alleged support for resource extraction is constituted as collaboration with the colonizers/oppressors, which renders him an illegitimate Itza'. This framing enables the BioItzá members to represent themselves as authentic indigenous people with appropriate values and goals – and therefore deserving of rights to control the local forest reserve.

In sum, this ethnographic moment highlights how the BioItzá wove conservationist discourses together with new discourses emerging from Guatemala's indigenous rights movement; this process of transculturation led to the formation of new models of individual and collective identity. Significantly, these discourses also drew boundaries around authentic indigenous identity as defined by those human–land relations deemed appropriate to indigenousness. In bringing the two discourses into relation, the BioItzá makes claim to indigenous identity and contests the abuse of power characteristic of internal colonialism.

Gendering the Pueblo Itza'

Shortly after San José's alcalde threatened the BioItzá's leadership and environmental goals, the group sought to denounce his abuse of power to the departmental attorney general, the United Nations Mission to Guatemala (MINUGUA) and the Office of Human Rights. However, they found themselves short of supporters, as many men

work outside the community. In this context, they invited members of San José's Women's Group for the Rescue of Medicinal Plants (*Agrupación Feminina Pro-Rescate de Plantas Medicinales*) to join their efforts. The Women's Group was formed in November 1996 to rescue ancestral knowledge of medicinal plant use and, through the sale of medicinal remedies, provide women with a source of income. In this ethnographic moment, I highlight how collaboration between the two groups led to shifts in the medicinal plants group's self-identification. Here, I draw primarily upon my field notes, wherein I recorded my experiences as a participant and observer.

That women had formed a group in San José is, in itself, worthy of additional commentary. The women's group formed out of the contradictory cultural politics of conservation encounters in the Maya Biosphere Reserve. Indigenous women in Guatemala have faced systematic and systemic forms of discrimination that have limited their participation as leaders within indigenous communities, not to mention ladino civil society.[90] While conservation NGOs tended to reproduce gender-based exclusions by privileging men as the primary agents of social and environmental change, donor organizations following trends in international development pushed for work with women.[91] In this context, a foreign researcher changed the women's status in San José by studying women's knowledge of medicinal plants. The women's group was born of this research relationship. As I detail elsewhere, however, some of the group's younger members who had attended university expressed a secondary goal: to encourage women to gain self-confidence and self-assurance in order to transform gendered behaviours that marginalize women.[92] This goal brought them into conflict with the BioItzá's leadership, which regarded the women's group as subordinate to the wider cultural revitalization movement precisely because of women's gender specific activities like medicinal plant use.

The women's group agreed to support the BioItzá in denouncing the alcalde's abuse of power. For two days, several members of the women's group piled into the BioItzá's pick-up truck and travelled to the departmental capital to make statements to the appropriate offices. Only two women had previous experience with this type of political activism.[93] When the group reached the attorney general's office, the women gathered quietly, awaiting instructions from the BioItzá's leader Don Benito. 'Make your statement with calm [*tranquilamente*] and without exaggeration,' he said sternly. Rosalia, president of the Women's Group, asked him what to say; she was told to say that the alcalde had gathered a group together 'to take possession of the BioItzá with the goal of cutting timber'. 'Then tell them,' he added, 'that this little group of women [*grupito de mujeres*], formed to rescue and collect medicinal plants, will be adversely affected.' His use of the diminutive when referring to the women's group is indicative of a common grammatical move in Guatemala to diminish the significance of women or their work.

As the two groups lined up to await the arrival of an official, a beat-up car pulled up with the words 'Cable Vision' painted on its doors. Two reporters gingerly stepped out to avoid the mud, and spoke with a BioItzá supporter and a CONAP representative. I moved closer to hear what was being said, at which point the reporter grimaced and asked, 'Who is she? With MINUGUA?' Then the reporter asked me for an interview.

Suddenly, the camera was rolling and I was explaining that the medicinal plants group would be adversely affected by the alcalde's attempt to take over the BioItzá's leadership, which was why the group was denouncing the alcalde. Although members of the women's group expressed excitement that their story had reached the news, I immediately regretted that I had become the group's spokesperson. Fortunately, the newsmen returned shortly thereafter and interviewed two women. At this point in the day, the women's narratives stressed the importance of the medicinal plants found in the BioItzá reserve and accused the authorities of abusing their power. Neither woman spoke of indigenous identity, nor used the word Itza'.

After the reporter drove off, Rosalia regretted that she had not solicited the support of those organizations involved with conservation, and determined to ask the newsman to interview another woman. She began teaching an older woman, Doña Margarita, what to say: 'You have to say, "we need support from the NGOs dedicated to the conservation of the forest".' I suggested that they include a phrase often used by Don Benito: the BioItzá is the only reserve in Guatemala managed by an indigenous group. The women showed little interest in this statement; instead, they agreed to say that the BioItzá is 'recognized at an international level' for its efforts.

Eventually, the long-awaited official arrived, and the women were again instructed on how to give their statement. Don Benito's nephew said, 'Tell them the people [supporting the alcalde] are immigrants and are not part of the *pueblo Itza*'.' Don Benito joined in, saying, 'we are Mayas ... too bad the alcalde is a *Mayero's* son but is now corrupt.' Soon thereafter, the Cable Vision reporter returned and agreed to tape another interview; after Doña Margarita spoke, another woman poked her head in front of the camera, adding, 'We are descendants of the Mayas.' The reporter laughed, and responded, 'Mayeros and maize growers' (*mayeros y maiceros*). While I am not privy to the reporter's intentions, his words invoke ambivalent associations between Maya peoples and maize in Guatemala. According to Maya cosmological beliefs, the gods created human beings out of maize. In Guatemala, there is a widespread belief that the symbolic significance of maize to the Maya created an obstacle to progress, in that Maya communities were seen as wanting to grow maize as opposed to other commercially viable crops such as coffee. Given that Mayeros historically provided the majority of agricultural produce in the central Petén's local market, the reporter may be framing Mayeros as outside modernity and therefore unequal to ladinos.

After the denunciations were over, the issue of indigenous identity became more salient for the medicinal-plants group. For example, in individual interviews that I had conducted previously, the women did not mention indigenous identity or make reference to Itza' traditions. Rather, they spoke about 'the ways of the ancestors'. After this event, however, I noted a marked shift in the women's discourse. Group members began to refer to themselves as Itza' and used the term *pueblo Itza'* when referring to those who supported conservation efforts in San José. Finally, within a short time the women agreed to add the word *Itza'* to the group's name, which became the Women's Group for the Rescue of Itza' Medicinal Plants.

In this instance of transculturation, the BioItzá's need to expand their support network created the opportunity for members of the women's medicinal plants group

to move between San José and official spaces in which the discourses of human rights were salient. In these spaces, they were asked to mimic the BioItzá's and my own discourses stressing the group's indigenous identity. Although the male members of the BioItzá perpetuate patriarchal relations in their interactions with the women, and my own position is ambiguous, the encounter is productive of alternative models of group identification. In time, the women's group chose to join the pueblo Itzá. While the BioItzá did not intentionally support women, and relations between the two groups grew ambivalent, some members of the women's group went on to become more deeply involved with the pan-Maya movement on an individual basis, and achieved leadership roles in local organizations that might otherwise have remained dominated by men – a truly remarkable occurrence.[94]

Concluding remarks

In the conservation encounters described here, individuals and collectives from differing social, institutional and geographical locations (i.e. the state, US-based NGOs, grassroots actors, researchers) are brought together under conditions shaped by power asymmetries and, importantly, by the legacies of US imperialism. My framework for analysing these encounters draws upon (1) transculturation to account for the historical specificity of power/knowledge configurations and (2) a geographically informed approach to performativity to understand how individuals constitute, negotiate, enact and contest the discourses and practices of powerful groups as they move through the spaces of conservation. As I outline, attention to the spatiality of conservation encounters reveals silences, contradictions and ambiguities, which in turn create opportunities for unexpected articulations and outcomes.

This approach contributes to political ecologies of transnational conservation in several ways. First, conservation is revealed to be more than a site of struggle over access to and control over resources. Social and environmental formations also are at stake. Political ecologists skilfully demonstrate that environmental categories such as wilderness or ecological problems like deforestation are not natural or inevitable, but constructed through power-laden social processes.[95] Here, I treat the construction of social groupings in a similar fashion. Tracing the play of power in the making of social formations is to treat them as ongoing sites of political struggle, rather than entities with *a priori* meanings. As with constructions of nature, there is a danger that comes with fixing or naturalizing categories. When cultural or ecological traits are taken as innate, differences between social groups may be perceived as timeless or even biologically determined. Once attached to a particular group, these cultural and environmental traits are easily mobilized to delimit inclusion or exclusion from the body politic.

In unmapping how categories are brought into being, enacted and bounded, political ecologists might help to reveal one of the subtle ways in which the discourses and practices of international conservation projects become instruments of power and exclusion. Despite the best intentions of US-based conservation organizations, evidence from locales the world over demonstrates that conservationist visions of

nature and protected-area models invariably privilege certain actors while marginalizing others.[96] At stake are local people's rights to livelihood and survival, but also representation and participation in countries where democratization movements struggle in the face of entrenched social inequalities.

And yet, to recognize that transnational conservation is underpinned by hegemonic assertions of power is not to suggest that the outcomes of conservation encounters are predetermined. As I outline here, attention to processes of negotiation, exchange and transformation that occur in the contact zones of conservation dispels the myth that local people in Latin American sites merely react to or parrot North American conservationist discourses and practices. Marginalized groups mediate these encounters in terms of long-standing power struggles at community, regional and national levels. In Sherry Ortner's words, 'Pieces of reality, however much borrowed from or imposed by others, are woven together through the logic of a group's own locally and historically evolved bricolage.'[97]

In the case of the Maya Biosphere Reserve, my research highlights how US-based NGOs produce and attempt to fix discursive constructions of identity and appropriate human–land relations to serve particular conservation goals. Conservationist imaginaries privileged the social group classified as Petenero, which allowed influential individuals to elaborate and articulate a reconfigured category of Peteneros as inherently conservationist. This process of transculturation allowed Peteneros to participate more fully in decision-making circles with the power to shape the region's future. In contrast, dominant discursive constructions of Peteneros rendered Mayeros invisible. As they moved between the spaces of conservation and the Pan-Maya movement, however, members of the BioItzá created a space in which to contest and reconfigure their marginalized position. An unintentional outcome of the encounters in San José is a group of empowered female indigenous leaders. Meanwhile, the extent to which conservation organizations limited the range of viable discourses and practices in the reserve meant that migrant groups found it very difficult to break in and build alliances around common agendas.

In the end, I would caution against approaching transculturation as a synthesis of the powerful and the powerless, which produces 'a space of harmonic resolution'.[98] Certainly, conservation encounters in the Petén provided opportunities for some local groups to reposition themselves in relation to shifting power structures and natural resource governance regimes, as well as long-standing local and regional level power struggles. Yet I am unwilling to suggest that the broader configurations of US–Guatemala relations are altered in any significant way by the micro-scale struggles in the Maya Biosphere Reserve. Conservationist NGOs remained in powerful positions relative to state environmental institutions and local actors until the end of the USAID's Maya Biosphere Project in 2001. And this case is by no means isolated. Indeed, as Mac Chapin reveals, in 2003 the Ford Foundation requested a series of studies in response to accusations that conservation giants Conservation International, The Nature Conservancy and the World Wildlife Fund are relying upon exclusionary practices the world over to carry out conservation projects.[99] However, the completed studies were withheld from the public at the insistence of these same organizations. In this

power-laden context, it is up to future generations of political ecologists to examine the cultural politics of conservation encounters in the contact zones of empire.

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Notes

[1] I use the term 'United Statesian' to refer to individuals from the United States; although awkward, the term is a direct translation of the Spanish word *estadounidense* or 'person from the US'. While people in Guatemala do use the term *norteamericano* to refer to people from the US, as a US citizen living in Canada I am very aware that, the term 'North America' may be used to refer to individuals from the US, Canada and Mexico.

[2] G. Joseph, 'Close encounters: toward a new cultural history of US–Latin American relations', in G. Joseph, C. LeGrand and R. Salvatore, eds, *Close encounters of empire: a cultural history of US–Latin American relations* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1998), p. 5.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 8.

[4] M. L. Pratt, *Imperial eyes: travel writing and transculturation* (New York, Routledge, 1992), pp. 4, 7.

[5] K. Zimmerer and E. Carter, 'Conservation and sustainability in Latin America and the Caribbean', in G. Knapp, ed., *Latin America in the 21st century: challenges and solutions* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 2002), pp. 207-49; G. MacDonald, D. Nielson and M. Stern, eds, *Latin American environmental policy in international perspective* (Boulder, CO, Westview Press, 1997).

[6] C. Christen, S. Herculano, K. Hochstetler, R. Prell, M. Price and J. T. Roberts, 'Latin American environmentalism: comparative views', *Studies in comparative international development* (1998), pp. 58–87; Torres, 'Transnational environmental NGOs: linkages and impact on policy', in MacDonald *et al.*, *Latin American environmental policy*, pp. 156-81.

[7] M. Chapin, 'A challenge to conservationists', *World watch* (2004), pp. 17–32.

[8] W. Fisher, 'Doing good? The politics and anti-politics of NGO practices', *Annual review of anthropology* (1997), pp. 439–64; R. Bryant and S. Bailey, *Third World political ecology* (New York, Routledge, 1997), pp. 130–57.

[9] F. Ortiz, *Cuban counterpoint: tobacco and sugar* (New York, A.A. Knopf, 1947).

[10] S. Spitta, *Between two waters: narratives of transculturation in Latin America* (Houston, TX, Rice University Press, 1995), p. 2.

[11] Pratt, *Imperial eyes*, p. 6.

[12] R. De Grandis and Z. Bernd, eds, *Unforeseeable Americas: questioning cultural hybridity in the Americas* (Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2000); D. Taylor, 'Transculturating transculturation', in B. Marranca and G. Dasgupta, eds, *Interculturalism and performance* (New York, PAJ, 1991), pp. 60–74; N. García Canclini, *Hybrid cultures: strategies for entering and leaving modernity* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

[13] Joseph, 'Close encounters', p. 16.

[14] Spitta, *Between two waters*, p. 24.

[15] Joseph *et al.*, *Close encounters of empire;* A. Kaplan and D. Pease, eds, *Cultures of United States imperialism* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1993).

[16] L. A. Eyre, 'The tropical national parks of Latin America and the Caribbean: present problems and future potential', *Conference of Latin Americanist geographers* (1990), pp. 15–33; MacDonald *et al.*, *Latin American environmental policy*; Zimmerer and Carter, 'Conservation and Sustainability in Latin America and the Caribbean'; see also W. M. Adams, *Green development: environment and sustainability in the Third World* (New York, Routledge, 1990).

[17] For example, see E. Young, 'State interventions and retreat in abuse of the commons: the case of Mexico's fisheries in Baja California Sur', *Annals of the AAG* (2001), pp. 283–306; S. C. Stonich, 'The environmental quality and social justice implications of shrimp mariculture development in Honduras', *Human ecology* (1995), pp. 143–68; K. Zimmerer, 'Environmental discourses on soil degradation in Bolivia: sustainability and the search for socioenvironmental 'middle ground'', in R. Peet and M. Watts, eds, *Liberation ecologies: environment, development, social movements* (New York, Routledge, 2004), pp. 107–24. See also Bryant and Bailey, *Third World political ecology*.

[18] Here, I am drawing on Chandra Mohanty's argument about the effect of essentialist representations, which create 'Third World women' (or men) as a 'coherent group identity' with particular sociocultural characteristics, 'prior to their entry into social relations'; Mohanty, 'Under western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses', in C. Mohanty, A. Russo and L. Torres, eds, *Third World women and the politics of feminism* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 70.

[19] Donald Moore, 'Clear waters and muddied histories: environmental history and the politics of community in Zimbabwe's eastern highlands', *Journal of Southern African studies* (1998), pp. 377–403. See also J. Kosek, 'Purity and pollution: racial degradation and environmental anxieties', in Peet and Watts, *Liberation ecologies*, pp. 125–65. For similar approaches in cultural geography, see B. Braun, *The intemperate rainforest: nature, culture, and power on Canada's West Coast* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2002); B. Sletto, 'Boundary making and regional identities in a globalized environment: rebordering the Nariva Swamp, Trinidad', *Environment and planning D: society and space* (2002), pp. 183–208.

[20] T. M. Li, 'Articulating indigenous identity in Indonesia: resource politics and the tribal slot', *Comparative studies in society and history* (2000), pp. 149–79.

[21] J. Butler, *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity* (1990) (New York, Routledge, 1999).

[22] J. Butler, *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of sex* (New York, Routledge, 1993).

[23] J. Butler, 'For a careful reading', in S. Benhabib, J. Butler, D. Cornell and N. Fraser, eds, *Feminist contentions: a philosophical exchange* (London, Routledge, 1995), p. 136, cited in G. Pratt, *Working Feminism* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 20.

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] *Ibid.*

[26] I am indebted to Pratt's analysis of performativity in *ibid.*, pp. 18–21.

[27] G. Pratt, 'Research performances', *Environment and planning D: society and space* (2000), pp. 639–51.

[28] Zimmerer and Carter, 'Conservation and sustainability'; Chapin, 'A challenge to conservationists'.

[29] J. Nations, B. Houseal, I. Ponciano, S. Billy, J. C. Godoy, F. Castro, G. Miller, D. Rose, M. Rey Rosa and C. Azurdia, *Biodiversity in Guatemala* (Washington, DC, World Resources Institute, 1988); V. Perera, 'A forest dies in Guatemala', *The Nation* (6 Nov. 1989), pp. 521–4; S. Berger, 'Environmentalism in Guatemala: when fish have ears', *Latin American research review* (1997) pp. 99–115.

[30] J. M. Soza, *Monografía del Departamento de El Petén* (Guatemala City, Jose de Pineda Ibarra, 1970).

[31] *Ibid.*

[32] In this context, Guatemala was following the prescriptions advocated by John F. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress, which advocated the expansion of capital-intensive agro-export industries throughout Guatemala; the US raised beef quotas for Central American countries to support the increased production: N. Schwartz, *Forest society: a social history of Petén, Guatemala* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990); I. Ponciano, 'Forestry policy and protected areas in the Petén, Guatemala', in R. B. Primack *et al.*, eds, *Timber, tourists, and temples: conservation and development in the Maya forest of Belize, Guatemala, and Mexico* (Washington, DC, Island Press, 1998), pp. 99–110; Soza, *Monografía*.

[33] Between 1958 and 1986, the principal authority in the Petén was a military-led institution – the National Agency for Promotion and Development of the Petén (*Empresa Nacional de Fomento y Desarrollo de El Petén* (FYDEP)). FYDEP was given 'extensive and in practice exclusive authority' in the Petén, ostensibly to promote economic development in the region: Schwartz, *Forest society,* p. 253; Soza, *Monografía*; J. Handy, *Gift of the devil: a history of Guatemala* (Boston, MA, South End Press, 1984).

[34] N. Schwartz, 'Colonization of northern Guatemala: the Petén', *Journal of anthropological research* (1987), pp. 163–83.

[35] *Ladino* is the term used in Guatemala to refer to a person of mixed European and indigenous descent; it can also refer to an indigenous person who no longer identifies him- or herself as such. The term, however, is not synonymous with *mestizo*, used in other contexts like Mexico where nation-building projects in the early 20th century celebrated the notion of mixed heritage. In Guatemala, nation-building was oriented around elevating the status of *ladino* to that of white Europeans through processes of whitening: A. Taracena Arriola, *Etnicidad, estado y nación en Guatemala, 1808–1944* (Antigua, Guatemala, CIRMA, 2002); C. Hale, 'Does multiculturalism menace? governance, cultural rights, and politics of identity in Guatemala', *Journal of Latin American studies* (2002), pp. 485–524.

[36] Schwartz, *Forest society,* p. 11; Nations *et al.*, *Biodiversity in Guatemala.*

[37] For instance, Francisco Boburg, a member of an established Petenero family, laments the 'waves of maize-growing peasants [*maiceros*]' overrunning the Petén: Boburg, 'El verdadero concepto de la colonización de El Petén', *Revista Petén-Itzá* (1974), p. 7. Throughout the 1980s, a substantial number of articles and editorials published in *Revista Petén-Itzá* criticize the rapid changes in the Petén, which are blamed on erratic government management and immigration. There are several articles about rapid deforestation and the loss of native species (no. 24, 1983; no. 27, 1986; no. 29, 1988).

[38] Schwartz, 'Colonization of northern Guatemala'.

[39] For the narrative outlined here, I draw upon interviews with key players in the reserve and Guatemala's environmental movement as well as research by other scholars such as Berger, 'Environmentalism in Guatemala'.

[40] Nations *et al. Biodiversity in Guatemala*.

[41] J. Nations, S. Billy, I. Ponciano, B. Houseal, J. Castillo, J. Godoy and F. Castro, *La Reserva la Biósfera Maya, Petén: estudio técnico* (Guatemala City, Guatemala, 1989).

[42] United States Agency for International Development, *Project paper: Maya Biosphere Project* (Washington, DC, USAID, 1989).

[43] C. Reining and R. Heinzman, *Non-timber forest products of the Maya Biosphere Reserve, Petén, Guatemala* (Washington, DC, Conservation International Foundation, 1992), p. 63.

[44] UNESCO, 'Action Plan for biosphere reserves', *Nature and resources* (1984), pp. 11–22.

[45] USAID, *Project paper*, p. 1.

[46] C. MacFarland, J. Godoy, S. Heckadon, R. Popper and J. Posadas, *Evaluación del Proyecto de la Biósfera Maya* (Washington, DC, Management Systems International, 1994).

[47] Ponciano, 'Forestry policy and protected areas in the Petén, Guatemala', in Primack *et al.*, *Timber, tourists, and temples*, pp. 99–110.

[48] J. Sundberg, 'Conservation and democratization: constituting citizenship in the Maya Biosphere Reserve, Guatemala', *Political geography* (2003), pp. 715–40.

[49] Soza is not the only individual to have an influence over conservationist discourses and strategies for the multiple use zone; however, he is one of the few to have published an influential study. In this case I use the individual's name, as I am citing his master's thesis: C. Soza Manzanero, '*Factores que inciden en la Conciencia Ecológica de los Habitantes de la Reserva de la Biósfera Maya en el Departamento de el Petén*' [Factors that shape the ecological conscience of the Maya Biosphere Reserve's inhabitants in the department of Petén] (Guatemala City, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, Facultad de Humanidades, Departamento de Pedagogia, 1996).

[50] Nations *et al.*, *Biodiversity in Guatemala,* p. 10. See also J. Nations, 'Xateros, Chicleros, and Pimenteros: harvesting renewable tropical forest resources in the Guatemalan Petén', in K. Redford and C. Padoch, eds, *Conservation of neotropical forests: working from traditional resource use* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. 208–19.

[51] Schwartz, *Forest society*.

[52] Nations *et al.*, *La Reserva la Biósfera Maya, Petén,* p. 4.

[53] Nations *et al.*, *Biodiversity in Guatemala,* p. 11; reproduced in Nations *et al.*, *La Reserva la Biósfera Maya, Petén,* p. 16.

[54] The northern Petén had remained public land and was not made available for purchase; thus, people developed a localized land market in which *mejoramientos* or 'betterments' were sold from one individual to another.

[55] Soza Manzanero, *Factores que inciden en la conciencia ecológica*.

[56] *Ibid.*, p. 112. Soza's categorization does not include San Luis, ostensibly because historically its residents have been primarily Q'eqchi'. In addition to distinct land-use practices, Petenero settlements are said to have maintained steady populations, unlike the 'demographic explosion' witnessed in migrant communities (*ibid.*, p. 62).

[57] *Ibid.*, pp. 100, 108.

[58] L. Grandia, C. Reining and C. Soza Manzanero, 'Illuminating the Petén's Throne of Gold: the ProPetén experiment in conservation-based development', in Primack *et al.*, *Timber, tourists, and temples,* p. 366.

[59] Soza, *Factores que inciden en la conciencia ecológica,* p. 19.

[60] *Ibid.*, p. 63.

[61] *Ibid.*, p. 18.
[62] *Ibid.*, p. 112.
[63] Grandia *et al.*, 'Illuminating the Petén's Throne of Gold', p. 367.
[64] As I pointed out in a previous article, the majority of NGO and government staff held immigrants responsible for environmental degradation in the reserve. For elaboration of the migrant-as-culprit discourse, see J. Sundberg, 'NGO landscapes: conservation and communities in the Maya Biosphere Reserve, Petén, Guatemala', *Geographical review* (1998), pp. 388–412.
[65] S. Atran, 'Itza Maya tropical agro-forestry', *Current anthropology* (1993), p. 696. It is more accurate to say that the Itza' are the only indigenous inhabitants who are able to make historical claims to land in the northern Petén. Q'eqchi' communities have migrated north from Alta and Baja Verapaz and some have settled in the reserve: Schwartz, *Forest society*.
[66] Phonology in Guatemala is highly politicized, and the spelling of the word Itza' has changed over time. I have chosen to use the spelling preferred by the Guatemalan Mayan Language Academy, but retain each author's or organization's choice of spelling.
[67] Arriola, *Etnicidad, estado y nación en Guatemala*. Guatemala is a small country with incredible ethnic diversity. There are 21 distinct Maya languages as well as Xinca and Garífuna (Afro-Guatemalan) speakers: D. Cojtí, *El movimiento Maya (en Guatemala)* (Guatemala City, Editorial Cholsamaj, 1997).
[68] R. Sieder, 'Rethinking democratisation and citizenship: legal pluralism and institutional reform in Guatemala', *Citizenship studies* (1999), pp. 103–18.
[69] Schwartz, *Forest society*.
[70] Atran, 'Itza Maya tropical agro-forestry'.
[71] R. Reina, 'The ritual of the skull in Peten, Guatemala', *Expedition* (1962), pp. 25–35; R. Reina, 'A peninsula that may have been an island: Tayasal, Petén, Guatemala', *Expedition* (1966), pp. 16–29; Schwartz, *Forest society*.
[72] Because the forest reserve is located within the municipal *ejido* or communal lands, the BioItzá is subject to municipal rules and regulations that apply to all residents of San José wishing to work lands within the *ejido*. The BioItzá Comité, or leadership committee, has a contract to rent the *ejido* from the municipality for a small annual fee. According to linguist C. Andrew Hofling, the BioItzá Comité had intended to change the spelling to reflect 'current Itzaj phonology'; however, they have not done so. See C. A. Hofling, 'Indigenous linguistic revitalization and outsider interaction: the Itzaj Maya case', *Human organization* (1996), pp. 108–16.
[73] R. Chayax, F. T. Colli, C. G. Caal and S. Gretzinger, 'The Bio-Itzá Reserve: history of an indigenous effort to conserve the Itzá Maya community of San José, El Petén, Guatemala', in Primack *et al.*, *Timber, tourists, and temples*, (Washington, DC, Island Press, 1998), p. 319.
[74] Chayax *et al.*, 'The Bio-Itzá Reserve', p. 322.
[75] Brochure for the BioItzá, n.d.
[76] S. Atran, 'Cultural management of biodiversity in the Maya rainforest: a proposal to establish an Itza biosphere reserve' (funding proposal, 1991), p. 1.
[77] Atran, 'Itza Maya tropical agro-forestry', p. 633.
[78] *Ibid.*
[79] Atran, 'Cultural management', p. 1.
[80] 'Visite la Reserva Ecologica Comunal "Biosfera Itza"' (brochure, n.d.).
[81] Several reliable sources confirm this event, including Chayax *et al.*, 'The Bio-Itzá Reserve'.
[82] Unless otherwise noted, quotations are taken from my field notes, 1996–67.

[83] I was asked to translate this letter, drafted in Spanish by the BioItzá on 19 Nov. 1996, for circulation amongst international NGOs.

[84] Letter dated 15 Nov. 1996; my translation.

[85] The MINUGUA established projects to offer free legal interpretation and free legal assistance in order to model appropriate application of its terms: Plant, 'Indigenous identity and rights', p. 332.

[86] The Agreement on Indigenous Rights was signed in 1995, but took effect upon the signing of the final peace agreement in Dec. 1996. Roger Plant suggests that indigenous peoples themselves had little direct participation in the negotiation of this agreement. However, the text of the agreement was taken from a set of proposals drawn up by COPMAGUA, the umbrella group representing Mayan peoples in the Assembly of Civil Society: *ibid.*, p. 327.

[87] Cojtí, *El Movimiento Maya;* K. Warren, *Indigenous movements and their critics: Pan-Maya activism in Guatemala* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1998).

[88] Warren, *Indigenous movements and their critics*, p. 8.

[89] Portion of statement read at the press conference 17 Feb. 1997; my translation.

[90] B. Thillet de Solorzano, *Mujeres y percepciones politicas* (Guatemala City, FLACSO, 2001).

[91] See J. Sundberg, 'Identities-in-the-making: conservation, gender, and race in the Maya Biosphere Reserve, Guatemala', *Gender, place, and culture* (2004), pp. 44–66.

[92] See *ibid.*

[93] Several members of the medicinal plants group had participated in Ixchel, a women's group active in San José between 1992 and 1995, dedicated to the revalorization of women's cultural and environmental knowledge. In 1994, members of Ixchel had been called upon to denounce this same alcalde's abuse of power, when he threatened to revoke the group's rights to rent a property within the municipality's *ejido*.

[94] For further details about this group, see Sundberg, 'Identities-in-the-making'.

[95] P. Robbins, *Political ecology: a critical introduction* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2004); R. P. Neumann, *Imposing wilderness: struggles over livelihood and nature preservation in Africa* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998); L. Jarosz, 'Defining and explaining tropical deforestation: shifting cultivation and population growth in colonial Madagascar (1896–1940)', *Economic geography* (1993), pp. 366–79; J. Fairhead and M. Leach, *Misreading the African landscape: society and ecology in a forest–savanna mosaic* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[96] C. Zerner, *People, plants, and justice: the politics of nature conservation* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2000); Byant and Bailey, *Third World political ecology*; Peet and Watts, *Liberation ecologies*.

[97] S. Ortner, 'Resistance and the problem of ethnographic refusal', *Society for comparative study of society and history* (1995), p. 176. See also K. Mitchell, 'Transnational discourse: bringing geography back in', *Antipode* (1997), pp. 101–14.

[98] A. Cornejo Polar, 'A non-dialectical heterogeneity: the subject and discourse of urban migration in Modern Peru', in De Grandis and Bernd, *Unforeseeable Americas,* p. 117.

[99] Chapin, 'A challenge to conservationists'.